

HENRY LAURENS.

Statesman, Patriot. Imprisoned in London Tower.

Henry and John Laurens, father and son, coming of Huguenot ancestry, and natives of South Carolina, played leading roles during the American Revolution and participated in some of its most stirring events.

John, the son, scarcely less noted than the father, gave many examples of extraordinary valor, calling forth, as did acts of his father, in Europe, plaudits even from their country's enemies.

Henry Laurens deserves notice not only for the leading part he took in early revolutionary movements, but for his intellectual attainments and statesmanship, and for his inflexible loyalty to his country under most trying circumstances.

He was born in Charleston in 1724. His education was got in England, and returning home he later became a leading merchant, "amassing great wealth." Retiring early from business, in 1770, he returned to Europe to superintend the education of his children. While there he neglected no opportunity to speak of the wrongs suffered by his country, and asked for redress. In 1774 he again came to Charleston and was chosen president of the Provincial Congress and council of safety. His speeches and printed pamphlets against British oppression showed the keen mind of an able lawyer. In 1776, having been elected a delegate to Congress, he was later elected its President, serving over a year from November first, 1777.

A treaty was proposed with Holland, and in 1779 Henry Laurens was selected by Congress as minister to that country. He sailed in 1780 in a packet named the "Mercury". This vessel is stated to have been laden with tobacco.

An exciting event took place on the 3rd of September, while the ship was sailing off the banks of New Foundland. Captain Keppel, of the British war-ship "Vestal" sighted the "Mercury" and gave chase.

When Laurens saw the British ship approaching he threw overboard a box containing his private papers. But the weights attached were too light to properly sink it. One of the sailors from the "Vestal" dived overboard and by his agility, managed to keep the precious box afloat until his companions and crew assisted him in recovering it. Important papers, some of them involving great individuals in both Holland, England and America, were discovered in the contents, along with the proposed treaty with Holland. The Dutch minister, refusing to repudiate the treaty, England, by this discovery, soon declared war on that republic.

Captain Keppel took his distinguished captive to England, where strict instructions were given to have him strongly guarded and brought to London. One lieutenant rode with him in a chaise, while two others followed in another behind.

Laurens' status in England was for a time a puzzle. Some judged him to be an American captive, while others declared him to be a rebel and traitor. Realizing Lauren's importance and position, high officials subjected him to a close and prolonged examination, an ordeal which proved his astuteness and loyalty, and his ability to take care of himself in the presence of the Solicitor-General, three secretaries of state and several under secretaries, all of whom lent a hand. His ability in baffling his inquisitors called forth praise and poetry even from his enemies. "He", declares Upcott, the English historian, "must extort admiration from the most attached and enthusiastic partisan." Messrs. Germaine, Stormont and Hillsborough asked him questions of which the following are samples: "Is your name Henry Laurens?" "It is." "Are you the same Henry Laurens who was President of the American Congress?" "I am."

"We are ordered by the King and Council to examine you, and have certain questions to propose to you."

"Your Lordships may save yourselves the trouble of an examination

XX Then

oppose the minister

"Then, Sir, we are directed to commit your person to the Tower." "I

am ready to attend," replied the imperturbed Laurens.

Besides the Secretaries who interrogated him the Solicitor General and Secretaries to both Stormont and Germaine ~~were~~ ^{sent} a hand.

In reply to particular questions, Laurens merely bowed, ^{and} thanked them for their courtesies and attentions he had received since his captivity, but in all matters relating to his country he kept the most inviolable silence. Addressing the under Secretaries, who with pen, ink and paper were ready to put down every word into the record, Laurens coolly remarked, "Your paper, gentlemen, will certainly retain its original purity for anything that falls from me, for on this subject I neither can, nor will, give the smallest information." Mr. Mansfield, the Solicitor General, ^{then} conferred with their lordships as to how to break the prisoner's silence. The lawyer was asked to practise a little of his profession of leading the witness, by first asking trifling questions and then proceeding to material subjects, and thus seduce Laurens into an inadvertent reply on something important. This plot failed and Mr. Laurens refused to unseal his lips after five hours of questioning. ^{XX} His papers "were sent to Windsor to undergo the inspection of a great personage." IV

After being committed to ~~the Tower~~ ^{prison} it was sometime before he was ~~finally~~ allowed to have his negro servant sent to his cell, but finally in the presence of the warden ~~this visit was allowed.~~ ^{the negro was allowed}

First taken to a house in Scotland Yard, where Sir William Meredith lodged, ~~Mr~~ the latter, who was acquainted with him, sent up his name and compliments and requested an interview. Mr. Laurens replied with thanks, but said that he did not think it would be altogether honorable to indulge himself in any interview with a gentleman however he might otherwise wish it, whose professed political principles were in a direct opposition to theirs.

Charles Earl Cornwallis of Town & London,
There is no necessity for me to write you
to receive into your custody the person of
Henry Vanderlogh, but through a suspicion of
high treason, also you are to keep safe until
he shall be delivered by due course of
law, for so doing this is your warrant,
Dated at Whitehall 6th of October

1780 =

~~for~~ Commitment addressed to "Charles Earl Cornwallis
Constable of the Tower of London"

"When Laurens was taken the minister blest,
Thought his work was all done,
and his carcase at rest;

" But from Willington fetch'd in
a mighty surprise,
He shrugged and he rubb'd and
half opened his eyes.

"When to London he came, he looked awful wise,
And tried for a moment to prop
up those eyes;
And declared that the German looked like a Scot;
Yet was not very sure if he saw him or not.

"His Worship, besure, to the Tower was sent;
As he came from his Lordship to Dillington went;
In a few words I conclude my extempore lay;
As the man would not speak I have nothing to say.
" But---Down, Derry--down."

Henry Lauren's commitment to the London Tower was directed to
the warden, designated as "Charles Earl Cornwallis, Constable of the
Tower of London" Its wording ran :

"These are in His Majesty's name to authorize you to receive
unto your custody the person of Henry Laurens, Esqr., sent herewith on
suspicion of high treason, whom you are to keep safe until he shall be
delivered by due course of law; for so doing this is your warrant.
" Dated at Whitehall, 6th of October, 1780. The three Secretaries,
" Stormont, Hillsborough and Germaine signed the paper.

There followed for Laurens more than a year of close confinement in
prison. At first he was refused ^{pen and paper or} permission to have his negro servant
come to his cell, but eventually this ^{last} request was acceded to, with the
warden always present during the visit.

Laurens' imprisonment vexed Washington. Some letters give evi-
dence of the American commanders' anxiety to have him freed . An ex-
change for General Burgoyne was suggested. Meanwhile events in the War
were working for Laurens. Yorktown had surrendered and the Americans
had another valuable officer for exchange in the person of Earl Cornwal-
lis.. Congress was incensed that its former president bore in min-
isterial eyes the character of a state prisoner, one who might be tried

for high treason; and passed a resolution to the effect that on account of the news that the late President of that body was confined in the Tower of London as a state criminal, under pretence of his being guilty of treasonable practices, " Directs the recall of Lieutenant-General Burgoyne and all other prisoners of war, absent on their paroles from America. " This sweeping order was, however, later countermanded.

Colonel John Laurens, writing in April, 1782, to General Washington, asked that his father be exchanged for Lord Cornwallis, surrendered at Yorktown. "But Congress," wrote Washington, "showed the greatest reluctance to exchange Lord Cornwallis upon any terms." However, Washington persevered, and through his powerful influence finally secured authority to negotiate the exchange.. Writing vigorously to Sir Guy Carleton, the new British commander in American waters, he says:

" In pursuance of an act of Congress, directing me to demand immediately Lieut.General Earl Cornwallis to the United States, unless the Honorable Henry Laurens be forthwith released from ^{his} captivity , and furnished with passports to any part of Europe or America." This brought forth the reply from Sir Guy:-

"Mr.Laurens has been for sometime in perfect freedom and has declared he considers Lord Cornwallis exchanged." On this same account, Dr.Franklin had written, on his own responsibility, releasing Cornwallis, and Earl Cornwallis then took his seat in the house of Peers.

After gaining his release from the Tower, Mr.Laurens visited and ministered to the hundreds of American naval prisoners held in prisons in England ,and arranged for their transfer to America. At the end of 1782 he was honored with the appointment by Congress as one of the Peace Commissioners at Paris and signed, late in the year, with Franklin and Jay, the preliminary Treaty.

Returning soon afterwards to America, he went to his native state and thereafter followed an agricultural life.

At his death, in Charleston, in 1792, his heirs must have been somewhat shocked at this paragraph in his will:

" Solemnly enjoin it on my son, as an indispensable duty, that as soon as he conveniently can, after my decease, he cause my body to be wrapped in twelve yards of tow cloth and burned until it be entirely consumed, and then, collecting my bones, deposit them wherever he may think proper. " This is said to have been the earliest instance of cremation in America.

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